

## Facebook's 26-year-old founder, Mark Zuckerberg, is squarely to blame for the mess over privacy controls

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The big mess surrounding Facebook's privacy controls -- the disgruntled users, the angry government watchdogs, the organized boycotts -- should all fall squarely on the shoulder's of the company's 26-year-old founder and chief executive.

After all, Mark Zuckerberg is the one with the vision of a world where the Internet is no longer a private and anonymous experience, but rather a social tapestry, where people share their daily digital travels with not only their friends, but the rest of the world.

He's the one who wanted to make it so that Facebook's nearly 500 million users would be forced to share more of themselves with the outside world. He's the one who believes that social norms are changing, that privacy is no longer the default setting coveted by Web users and that "a world that's more open and connected is a better world."

Clearly, this recent backlash over privacy at Facebook is all his fault.

Then again, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to condemn Mr. Zuckerberg.

Truth is, many of us still don't really understand Facebook. Sure, we know it's a site where we can chat with our friends, share pictures and play games that allow us to cultivate small armies of farm animals, but when it comes to understanding just how intertwined Facebook has become with our day to day lives, with the fabric of our emerging connected culture, we just don't know what to make of it.

Not anymore, anyway.

Never before has the world seen something like Facebook. Not since the birth of the Internet itself has such a disruptive technology changed the way we interact and experience the world around us. Average users and privacy watchdogs have only recently begun to understand the intricacies of the House that Zuck Built.

For many Web users -- including more than 15 million Canadians -- Facebook is their base of operations on the Web. Facebook is literally the public face they present to the world, it is their social circle and it is a perpetually updated yearbook all rolled into one. It's the little piece of online real estate they can call home.

In just six years, the population of Facebook has exploded from a few thousand Ivy League students to eclipse the combined populations of the United States and Canada. Indeed, among certain demographics in

North America, non-Facebook users are something of an anomaly.

It barely classifies as a social network anymore. Facebook is a category unto itself. An island nation in cyberspace, governed by Mr. Zuckerberg from the company's Palo Alto, California headquarters.

The problem is, the laws of Facebookland keep changing.

Over the past six months, Facebook has unleashed a number of alterations to its privacy controls that not only made more of its users' personal data public by default, but also swelled the company's privacy options to 50 buttons, 170 choices and a word count that surpassed even the United States Constitution.

This week, Facebook bowed to public pressure and simplified its privacy settings, creating one single page where users can control whether their information can be seen by their friends, friends of friends or everyone on the Web.

Facebook also enabled users to block outside software developers -- the makers of the addictive games and quiz features that have become a staple of the service -- from accessing their personal information.

To ensure that companies aren't viewing your details, however, means shutting down your Farmville account and deleting the "Which Simpsons Character Are You?" application for your profile.

Still, if you talk to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, even with the changes announced this week, Facebook is actually more open today than it was a year ago when the office concluded its 14-month investigation into the site's privacy controls, forcing sweeping changes.

Just how upset are users? When four New York-based college students started taking donations to help fund a project that would develop an open sourced Facebook rival where users' data would remain private, they raised more than \$100,000 in a matter of months.

"Quit Facebook Day," an online protest started by a pair of Toronto men, will take place on Monday. As of press time, nearly 25,000 Facebook users had pledged to permanently erase their profiles from Facebook's database.

Facebook's citizens are angry. Many feel betrayed by a site which started out by offering them a chance to

reconnect with long lost friends, organize parties and share photos in what felt like a closed, personal -- even private -- setting.

It's as though Facebook has broken an unwritten social networking contract with its users.

According to some philosophers, including the 17th century writer Thomas Hobbes, society or "the social" is only possible through the social contract, whereby citizens agree to surrender certain freedoms in exchange for order, peace and a relief from chaos.

With Facebook, users were willing to enter into the social networking contract offered by the company. In exchange for a personal homepage, a mechanism for connecting with friends, users were willing to let Facebook make money by helping marketers advertise to them based on the information in their profiles.

As Facebook's audience grew, so did the company's value to marketers. Based on the information at Facebook's disposal, advertisers could tailor their marketing to smaller and more targeted groups. Instead of advertising on car Websites outside Facebook, marketers could have their messages appear beside only the Facebook profiles belonging to users who said they liked Honda Civics or Ford Mustangs, thereby maximizing the return on their investment.

The problem is, Facebook kept changing the terms of the user contract. Information that wasn't meant to be public became widely available. Default settings were changed so that more information could be shared with the wider Web.

Of course, this was all part of Mr. Zuckerberg's plan to gradually spread Facebook's tentacles across the Web, through new social features and open graphs. The idea was that Facebook would become the default social standard that would blanket the Web.

Mr. Zuckerberg's vision is a world where newspaper Websites can show you stories recommended by your Facebook friends, where retailers can suggest items you might like based on your Facebook interests and where Internet radio stations customize playlists based on your favourite bands and the songs your friends say they like.

Just as newspapers and magazines are only as valuable to advertisers as their reader base, Facebook's value lies in its collection of members. Mr. Zuckerberg knows this. Without its captive user base sharing their lives with each other and with Facebook, the company wouldn't be worth an estimated US\$15- billion.

Facebook's challenge lies in finding ways to encourage its users to open up about themselves, to share more information publicly, safe in the knowledge that it's not just good for Facebook, but it's good for them too.

But after this recent user backlash, questions are now being raised about just how social we're willing to be

online. In an op-ed piece in the Washington Post this week, Mr. Zuckerberg admitted that perhaps Facebook moved too quickly in its quest to find new ways to "connect with the social Web and each other."

Mr. Zuckerberg believes that the social norm has evolved over time and that people are less concerned about privacy and more willing to share today than ever before.

Maybe he's right. How else do we explain our obsession with Facebook, reality television, blogging and services like Twitter?

Of course, the mere existence of Facebook as a central tenet of Western culture will continue to alter our notions of privacy. Things we consider private today may seem inconsequential in five years time.

Still, how social is too social? It's a question that will need to be answered by not just Facebook, but also by Twitter, Foursquare and other social connection services. As social networking gravitates towards mobile devices and smartphones -- and advertisers are able to target users based not just on their information, but also their location -- people will have to decide just how plugged into the social Web they're willing to be.

If anything, this recent rebellion from the citizens of Facebookland shows that at least some users aren't quite ready to share in Mr. Zuckerberg's vision of the future.

At least, not yet.

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